THE PLAYS OF WILLY RUSSELL: FROM LIVERPOOL TO THE BEACH

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In Willy Russell's *Our Day Out*, written as a television play in 1976 and adapted for the stage in 1983, several Liverpool teachers take some of their working-class pupils on a day's outing—to a zoo, to a castle, to an amusement park, and, perhaps most importantly, to a beach. One of the children, Carol, is so much impressed by the sea, and by the freedom which it represents, that she threatens to jump off a cliff rather than go home:

> Why can't I just stay out here an' live in one of them nice white houses, an' do the garden an' that?... It's been a great day today. I loved it. I don't wanna leave here an' go home.[1]

She is eventually wheedled away from the edge of the cliff and taken home with the others. Still, as she leaves the bus at the end of the outing (and of the play), she again plaintively asks a teacher, "Why can't it always be like that?" She then "walks off clutching her goldfish in its plastic bag," only to be greeted by the raucous offstage voice of her parent, "Carol! Where the friggin' hell have you been? Just get in this bloody house!"[2]

The basic contrast has been made: between the dreariness and unhappiness of Carol's life at home and the joyous feeling of freedom, however temporary, from restraint which the outing has provided her. Why, she childishly wonders, isn't life always like life at the beach? Why can't she leave home and live happily ever after elsewhere? The terms of the contrast, and Carol's plaintive queries, are fundamental and continuing elements in the art of the British playwright Willy

Russell.

Willy Russell's success in recent years has been striking. Although he has not yet equalled Alan Ayckbourn in the sheer number of "hits" for the West End and for amateur productions, he *has* recently produced—and that in rather quick succession—three outstandingly successful texts: *Educating Rita* (1980), the musical *Blood Brothers* (1983; revived in London 1990), and *Shirley Valentine* (1986; revived in London 1988 and 1990). The first and third of this trio have also been critically and financially successful in their film versions. In fact, in some recent years, largely as a result of the phenomenal success of *Educating Rita*, Willy Russell has joined Shakespeare and Alan Ayckbourn to form the trio of playwrights most often performed in Britain.

Rather than to begin this consideration of Willy Russell's work with a detailed discussion of his blockbuster *Educating Rita*, however, it would seem better to begin with a more general discussion of his output. What type of play does he write? More especially, what is his basic subject matter, and what are the basic situations with which he works?

Russell normally treats serious themes in plays which are fundamentally comic, but also basically realistic (the relatively early farce *One for the Road* (1979; revised 1985) and the tragic/melodramatic *Blood Brothers* being the great exceptions). The difficulties which his characters face are real, and Russell's sympathy for them is evident, but the mode is normally comic; their predicaments are normally presented as unpleasant and troubling rather than truly dire.

As to his basic subject matter, it can be located clearly both by geographical location and social class. All of his plays are placed either vaguely in "the north of England"[3] or, more precisely, in Liverpool or its immediate environs. These locations clearly reflect Russell's own roots: he was, he reports in "Educating the Author," his introduction to the printed text of *Educating Rita*, born in Whiston, "which is just outside Liverpool."[4] The same introduction speaks of later periods of residence or schooling in Knowsley, Huyton, and Rainford, all in the Liverpool area.[5]

The social milieu of Russell's plays is similarly precise, similarly limited, and similarly autobiographical: the working class. The texts of the eight plays now in print were examined for this study. Of these eight plays, only in *Our Day Out*, in which several schoolteachers appear, two of them at least definitely of the middle class; in *Educating Rita*, with its raffish college teacher, and in *Blood Brothers*, which is in nearly all respects a special case, do any other than working-class characters even appear. This social milieu was Russell's own:

> My dad worked in a factory (later, having come to hate factory life, he got out and bought a chip shop) and my mother worked in a warehouse.[6]

In Russell's own words, he "didn't care much for school,"[7] and so it is no surprise that, after secondary school education at Huyton and Rainford, he left school, having found it uninspiring. Without any great interest of his own, but at his father's insistence, he took an examination aimed at determining his suitability as an apprentice printer. He failed that examination and subsequently, despite his own, inchoate desire to be a writer, accepted his mother's "bizarre" suggestion that he "become a ladies' hairdresser!" Russell can now "only think that a desire to have her hair done free must have clouded her normally reasonable mind." Only at the age of twenty, after six years' work caring for ladies' hair, did he enroll "in a night class for O level English literature," pass it, and eventually enroll in a full-time college course.[8]

Willy Russell's background of working-class life in Liverpool and its environs is inevitably reminiscent of the Beatles, those other great contributions of Merseyside to the cultural life of modern Britain. It is, then, no great surprise that, during his secondary school days, Russell went to

> a dark underground club every lunchtime. It was called the Cavern and the smell of sweat in there was as pungent as any in a factory, the din was louder than any made by machines. But the sweat was mingled with cheap perfume and was produced by dancing and the noise was music, made by a group called the Beatles.[9]

Nor, in view of all this, is it surprising that Russell not only took the name of his radio play of 1977, *I Read the News Today*, from a Beatle song, but also concluded that play with that same music.[10] And indeed Russell's first great success had come in 1974 with a musical piece entitled *John Paul George Ringo... and Bert.* (This musical was that year's winner of the Evening Standard's award and the London Theatre Critics' award for Best Musical.)

Nor is it surprising that the language of Willy Russell as a playwright is almost always that of the working class of the Liverpool area. Russell has always spoken with humour of his early introduction to these speech patterns. Although the Whiston of his birth was "just outside Liverpool," he says that people

> talk funny in Whiston. To a Liverpudlian everyone else talks funny. Fortunately, when I was five my mum and dad moved to Knowsley, into an estate full of Liverpudlians who taught me how to talk correctly.[11]

This use of the vocabulary and speech patterns native to Liverpool rather than those of standard English has perhaps contributed to the relative neglect of Russell outside his native Britain, though it has obviously not limited his success there.

Russell's basic subject matter is, then, working-class life in the north of England, expressed in the language of his characters. What of his basic situations and themes?

A Russell play is typically based on an opposition of locales. At least one of the pair is, naturally enough, "somewhere in the north of England." It may be the street in front of a school, as in *Our Day Out*; it may be the front room and kitchen in a "house on a council housing estate," as in *Breezeblock Park*[12]; it may be "a lounge in an 'executive' dormer bungalow, situated on an estate a few miles from a major northern city," as in *One for the Road*[13]; it may be "the kitchen of a semi-detached house" in Liverpool itself, as in the first act of *Shirley Valentine*[14]; it may even be "The Ladies and Gents in a Liverpool dance hall," as in *Stags and Hens.*[15] Whatever the specific Northern locale, though, it is not only familiar to the working-class characters, but is

also felt by at least the main characters, and by the author, to be limiting, if not actually oppressive.

Naturally enough, the other, contrasting place is significantly different, offering more freedom of action and, by extension, more possibility of happiness and self-fulfillment. It may simply be a nearby castle, amusement park, or beach, as in *Our Day Out.* It may be London, as in *Stage and Hens*, or it may—clearly in the tradition of E. M. Forster—even be sunny Greece, as in *Shirley Valentine.* On the other hand, it may even simply be yet another housing estate, but one which is perceived by the characters as a step up, as somehow offering better living conditions, as in *Blood Brothers.* Whatever and wherever the somewhere else is, though, it is felt to be more desirable than where the characters are now.

At least it is more desirable in the eyes of the author and in those of at least one of his characters. True, some of his working-class characters are content with their Liverpudlian lives, but his central characters are always seeking to escape in one way or another. The escape may be such a simple, trite one as a young girl looking to marriage as a way of escaping her dominating parents, as in *Breeze-block Park.* It may even be a physical escape, as when Linda, the bride-to-be who has been entertained at a "hen party" on the eve of her marriage, decides not to marry her fiance after all; rather, she decides to run away with, or to run after (the text is ambiguous on this point), a former boyfriend who has found some success away from Liverpool as a professional musician. In order to elude her friends, Linda goes into the men's room of the Liverpool dance hall:

> [She tries the large window. It is reinforced glass, no way out. We see her go into the WC. She comes out looking for something to break the window. She sees the towel dispenser and smashes it off the wall. She goes into the WC, closes the door, and bolts it. There is a clash of glass. Linda exits][16]

Between those who actually try to escape and those who are content to stay where they are, there are many people who know, deep in their hearts, that they are not happy and that there is something

different, something better in life, though they sometimes—or even usually—refuse to admit this. Rita in *Educating Rita* is clearly one of those who seeks to change her life, but her account of an evening out with her husband, Denny, and her own family is heartbreakingly suggestive of the many thwarted, quietly unhappy lives around her. "Just because you pass a pub doorway an' hear the singin'," she tells her tutor, "you think we're all O. K., that we're all survivin', with the spirit intact," but that is an over-simplification. One time recently, she relates,

> I want . . . to the pub where Denny was, an' me mother, an' our Sandra, an' her mates. . . . I went into the pub an' they were singin', all of them singin' some song they'd learnt from the juke-box. An' I stood in that pub an' thought, just what the frig am I trying to do? Why don't I just pack it in an' stay with them, an' join in the singin'? . . . Well, I did join in with the singin', I didn't ask any questions, I just went along with it. But when I looked round me mother had stopped singin', an' she was cryin', but no one could get it out of her why she was cryin'. Everyone just said she was pissed an' we should get her home. So we did, an' on the way I asked her why. I said, "Why are y' cryin', Mother?" She said, "Because—because we could sing better songs than those." Ten minutes later, Denny had her laughing and singing again, pretending she hadn't said it. But she had.[17]

Despite Russell's evident affection for most of his working-class characters, he exhibits a special empathy with those of them who feel restless in that culture, who feel it to be somehow a prison, and who consequently feel a desire to escape it in one way or another. A Russell hero is likely to be like Russell's own father in being, or in the process of becoming, dissatisfied with factory work—and even with its so-called economic benefits. Their wages only enable the workers to "buy more junk and trash; that's all."[18] Also, of course, the elder Russell was unusual in being able actually to escape the factory. Mickey in *Blood Brothers*, for instance, has a much more typical story:

> Y' know somethin', I bleedin' hated that job, standin' there all day never doin' nothin' but put cardboard boxes together. I used to get . . . used to get terrified that I'd have to do it for the rest of me life. But, but after three months of nothin', the same answer everywhere, nothin', nothin' down for y', I'd crawl back to that job for half the pay and double the hours. Just . . . just makin' up boxes it was. But after bein' fucked off from everywhere, it seems like it was paradise.[19]

Attempts like Mickey's to escape are common—but are usually unsuccessful, particularly in the earlier plays. Sometimes the character attempts a physical escape—a move, temporary or permanent, to the brighter lights of somewhere else (as with Linda's climb through the restroom window in *Stags and Hens*). Sometimes the character's dream includes a desire to rise in the class structure (as in *One for the Road*). *Educating Rita* has perhaps been especially successful because its title character not only sums up the desires for escape of the other plays; she also adds one of her own—a desire for a richer cultural content in her life.

Although Rita is married and has been working several years as a hairdresser, she has enrolled as an Open University student at a "Victorian-built university in the north of England."[20] Throughout the play she is assiduous in learning "proper" ways speaking and acting, the ways the regular students at the university seem to her to speak and act. By the end of the play she can announce proudly that, at least in her own eyes, she has largely succeeded in her aims:

> I've got a room full of books. I know what clothes to wear, what wine to buy, what plays to see, what papers and books to read.

She has displayed an overwhelming desire to broaden her cultural horizons. Her tutor taunts her by saying that she has found only "a different song" to sing, but Rita persists in thinking that it is "a better song," one such as her mother has only sensed, and it seems that Russell agrees with his heroine.[21]

What, then, is preventing these characters from escaping, from changing their lives? The most obvious reason is economic—they can't afford to. How could these people earn a living if they *did* quit? And where would they go? And who would take care of their families? Leaving a settled way of life in search of another, unknown one calls for a definite self-possession and self-confidence, and their many humbling experiences of the past have left few of Russell's characters with the intellectual and emotional resources which they would need for such a break for freedom. Moreover, leaving a

close-knit family situation (and Russell's families tend to be close-knit indeed), with all the economic and emotional uncertainty which that would involve—for themselves and for others—calls for more self-centeredness, and even selfishness, than Russell is likely to endow his main characters with.

Indeed, in his early plays, although Russell presents such attempts at rebellion sympathetically and with understanding, he is also likely to depict them as betokening a certain emotional immaturity. The rebellious, often "smart-alecky" schoolchildren of *Our Day Out* are only the most obvious examples. Dennis of *One for the Road*, for instance, is presented as comical in his rather naive dreams of future freedom and his pathetically ineffectual attempts to escape. Although he is thirty-five, "a father and a mortgagee,"[22] he plans on "going to the slip road and going to wherever the lifts happen to take me."[23] It is, then, no real surprise when, at the last moment of the play, he finds himself unable really to go on the road, unable to seize the freedom which he has been asking for even when it is offered to him:

> [Dennis surveys the empty room, noticing the open front door. He stands, trying to will himself through it$_{[\cdot]}$ Jane [his neighbor] rushes in, heading for the telephone [to try to have him intercepted]$_{[\cdot]}$ She stops when she sees Dennis. She stands for a moment, watching him confronting the door. She holds the hall door wide open for him$_{[\cdot]}$
> **Jane** Go on Dennis, go on. There's nothing stopping you.
> [She finally closes the door as it becomes obvious that he is not going to go.][24]

Despite her youth, Sandra, the nineteen-year-old daughter in *Breezeblock Park*, rebellious and an unwed mother-to-be, possesses more of the requisite self-confidence and self-possession than does Dennis, but even she has only a very vague idea of what she wants to do with her life; she knows only that she wants somehow to get away from her home environment and its influence. Also, she must face the additional difficulty that her family is actively repressive and restricting. The other members of her family love her in their own fashion, but they are too certain that they know what is best for her. Her parents and aunts and uncles prove completely unable to understand

why anyone would wish for any life better than, or even different from, their own. They are perfectly content to compete with each other in the acquisition of new suites of living-room furniture. Even Tim, Sandra's boyfriend and the father of Sandra's unborn child, fails really to comprehend why, for example, they could not simply marry and live with her parents thereafter. No one understands, that is, until near the end of the last scene, when Sandra's mother suddenly relents:

> **Sandra** (to Tim) You're taking me away. Now.
> **Tim** (shaking his head) No, Sandra. You've got to be sensible. Where could we live? How could we exist? This is the best way.
> **Sandra** (desperately) We're going.
> **Tommy** [her uncle] You just shut that mouth of yours. That's your fella you're talking to.
> [Sandra turns to John [her cousin]]
> **Sandra** Excuse me.
> [John looks at Sandra. He does not know what he is going to do until Ted [his father, and thus Sandra's uncle] moves to his side: then it becomes obvious that John is not going to let Sandra through. She goes to each member of the family in turn. No-one is going to let her through. Finally she comes to Betty [her mother]. She looks at her mother. There is a long pause in which the two women look at each other. Slowly, Betty stands $aside_{[\cdot]}$ Sandra walks past Betty, through to the kitchen, and $out_{[\cdot]}$ They all look at Betty: she sits down. There is an uncomfortable $silence_{[\cdot]}$][25]

The suddenness of Betty's capitulation may smack of wish-fulfillment, but the final image is not one of Sandra triumphantly rebellious in any way, but is, rather, the regressive one of the family left behind—united in watching television. Even Betty joins them in this after she has sent Tim, her prospective son-in-law, off to join Sandra. Tim has needed her prodding to join his wife, so the future of Sandra's rebellion does not look too bright. At the least, any future she envisages for herself bids fair to be the traditional feminine one centered on a man—on her husband—and on their unborn child.

Linda, the young woman in *Stags and Hens* who is being entertained on the eve of her marriage, does indeed, as we have seen, make a literal escape through the window of the men's toilet. Linda is indeed different from Sandra, one more in a position to make a clean break-

away. Not only is she a young woman as yet unmarried, and so with no family responsibilities at all; she is also already supporting herself. Even so, although Linda succeeds in the escape which the earlier Dennis only dreamed about, she does not impress the audience as being especially mature. Her passion for her former boyfriend seems to be rekindled with remarkable rapidity, casting into doubt the depth of both her initial commitment to her husband-to-be and her reaction against him. Also, for her to flee Dave on the eve of her marriage to him in order to accompany, or to follow after, Peter, is only to exchange one man for another. Linda does not seem ready to assume a life of true emotional independence.

It is only in his recent plays that Russell has come to present characters who are, on the one hand, fully mature, married adults, but who are also, in being willing to abandon their families in the search for self-fulfillment, possessed of enough maturity and self-confidence truly to bring it off, simultaneously winning, and keeping, the audience's sympathy.

The first of Russell's fully mature heroines is Rita in *Educating Rita* of 1980. Perhaps much of the success of this play as a text for both professional and amateur performance may be attributed to its modest technical requirements; the two-act play needs only one interior set and employs only two performers. Certainly, however, the play's widespread success cannot be ascribed only to such technical details. Surely it is more significant that the text of the play seems to have struck a resonant emotional chord in the hearts of many. Most precisely, the play can perhaps best be seen as a version of the *Pygmalion/My Fair Lady* theme—although this theme itself is, of course, a variation on the evergreen Cinderella theme.[26]

The similarities between Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* and *Educating Rita* are many, and clear. Both treat primarily the relationship between a male teacher and a female student. In both plays, the expected age and status differences between the two are reinforced by a class difference, with the teacher holding the higher class position. Henry Higgins is clearly of the upper middle class, in contrast to Liza

Doolittle's Cockney flower girl; Russell's Frank is only an unsuccessful poet making a half-hearted effort to teach at a provincial university, but still he represents a much higher level of culture—and perhaps of income as well—than the hairdresser Rita. In both plays the basic subject matter taught is English—pronunciation in *Pygmalion* and literature in *Educating Rita*, and in both this initial field of study is soon broadened to include social skills as well.

Also, in both plays the teacher-student combination is successful. In both plays the female student is made able to rise socially, with the result that both women encounter the distasteful situation of having come to feel at home in neither their old nor their new circumstances. Moreover, in both cases the subject matter is taught very well. By the end of each play, the student has been brought to a point at which she no longer needs the teacher's guidance and instruction. Also, and more importantly for the dynamics of the plays, in both cases the teacher and the student come to transcend their formal relationship to become friends, at least friends of a kind.

Moreover, both playwrights, Shaw and Russell, raise the possibility of the teacher and the student falling in love; the possibility is real enough for both men to show definite signs of jealousy of the other men in the women's lives—Liza's beau, Freddy Eynesford-Hill, and Rita's husband, Denny. Also, both plays suggest this possibility only to thwart any audience expectations which they have thus raised. Shaw's famous reversal of expectations involves, of course, his idea that Higgins does not need a wife because he is an artist. Russell indulges in no such philosophical flights of fancy; more simply, having established that Frank is losing his live-in girlfriend, and that Rita is conveniently estranged from her husband, he deliberately teases his audience with hints of sexual activity, only to let them down suddenly and delightfully:

Rita: All I've ever done is take from you. I've never given anything.
Frank: That's not true you've...
Rita: It is true. I never thought there was anythin' I could give you. But there is. Come here, Frank...

Frank: What?
Rita: Come here... (She pulls out a chair.) Sit on that... [Frank is bewildered.]
Rita: Sit...
[Frank sits and Rita, eventually finding a pair of scissors on the desk, waves them in the air.]
Rita: I'm gonna take ten years off you...
[She goes across to him and begins to cut his hair.]
[Blackout.][27]

Rita's actions are perfectly appropriate both to her profession as hairdresser and to her independent personality. What Shaw based on philosophy, Russell bases on character. The effect of this ending is, though, to make Russell's play even more determinedly unromantic, or anti-romantic, than Shaw's.

In the face of all these similarities between *Pygmalion* and *Educating Rita*, the differences may seem less important. Nevertheless, they are significant. For one thing, Rita makes more of an attempt to turn the tables by revamping her mentor—curbing his drinking and smoking in particular, and she even succeeds in large measure. Most especially important, however, is the shift in the fundamental point of view. In *Pygmalion* Shaw's concentration on the gentleman-teacher, Henry Higgins, is evident; Higgins is the titular "Pygmalion figure," and also, after all, Shaw undertook the writing of the play in the first place to meet a challenge: that he could not write a successful, popular play with a teacher of phonetics as its hero. In the case of Willy Russell's play, on the other hand, Rita, not Frank, is in the title, and hers is, in every way, obviously the starring part.

There is also an interesting difference in the endings. The ambiguity with regard to the ending of Shaw's *Pygmalion* is well known. Shaw insisted that there was no doubt that, by the end of the play, Liza had no further use for Henry Higgins and so would marry Freddy Eynesford-Hill, a man she could dominate, and set up a flower shop. Shaw's audience have resisted this idea, remaining equally convinced that Henry and Liza are meant for one another; the romantic reunion provided to end the musical adaptation, *My Fair Lady*, embodies this common conviction. Whether Liza is to marry Freddy, as in Shaw's

original, or whether she is to return to Higgins and love *him*, as in the Lerner and Loewe adaptation, Liza's course of action is clear.

Russell's Rita, on the other hand, ends the play obviously undecided about what to do—and undecided in an absolute, radical manner. Of course, she is not romantically interested in Frank, but a more important decision awaits her. Having distanced herself from her husband and having simultaneously liberated her mind by her course of study, what shall she do now? It would be a rash audience indeed which could feel at all sure in guessing which course of action Rita will choose to follow:

> **Rita:** ... Tiger's [a fellow student] asked me to go down to France with his mob.
> **Frank:** Will you?
> **Rita:** I dunno. He's a bit of a wanker really. But I've never been abroad. An' me mother's invited me to hers for Christmas.
> **Frank:** What are you going to do?
> **Rita:** I dunno. I might go to France. I might go to me mother's. I might even have a baby. I dunno. I'll make a decision, I'll choose. I dunno.[28]

Rita might, then, have a baby by, presumably, returning to her husband, or she might leave her husband and return to her mother's, or she might leave both husband and mother and go off to France with a group of carefree, footloose young people! A remarkably varied range of options indeed! The only sure thing is that she will *not* enter upon any romantic liaison with Frank. The really important point would, though, seem to be that Russell is, unlike Shaw and Shaw's audiences, not especially interested in exactly what Rita decides to do. The point is that she herself will make the decision.

Interestingly enough, there is an additional, reasonant literary echo in Russell's text. Martin Dysart, the psychiatrist in Peter Shaffer's *Equus*, wonders if he has perhaps not destroyed something valuable and original in "curing' his patient's mental disorder.[29] Russell's teacher, Frank, has similar doubts. Rita has asked him to teach her how to read literature and also how to write about it in the accepted academic form. He has agreed to do so, but as their experiment proceeds, he has more and more doubts:

Frank: But if you're going to write this sort of stuff you're going to have to change.

Rita: All right. Tell me how to do it.

Frank (getting up): But I don't know if I want to tell you, Rita, I don't know that I want to teach you. (He moves towards the desk.) What you already have is valuable.

Rita: Valuable? What's valuable? The only thing I value is here, comin' here once a week.

Frank: But, don't you see, if you're going to write this sort of thing—(He indicates the pile of essays.)—to pass examinations, you're going to have to suppress, perhaps even abandon your uniqueness. I'm going to have to change you.

Shaffer's Alan is not given the chance to make Rita's reply to all this: "But don't you realize, I want to change!"[30] Indeed, while Shaffer's Alan is no doubt like Rita in valuing his own uniqueness, it is basic to Russell's intention in any of his plays to present—and to present as basic, as understandable, and as admirable—the desire of such of his characters as Rita to adapt themselves to an environment which is alien to them in some way, for only by changing can they hope to escape.

Russell's next major success was his musical of 1983, *Blood Brothers*, a text which is, as has been mentioned, exceptional among Russell's works. For one thing, it employs the melodramatic, if not the tragic, mode. Too, even though it ends with the violent deaths of two of its main characters, it is free of any suspense; the nature, and also the form, of the ending are foreshadowed over and over, with recurring superstitious motifs reinforcing the explicit opening:

Mrs Johnstone (singing: off) Tell me it's not true
Say it's just a story.

[**The Narrator** steps forward in a spotlight]

Narrator (speaking) So did y'hear the story of the Johnstone twins?
As like each other as two new pins,
Of one womb born, on the self same day,
How one was kept and one given away?

An' did you never hear how the Johnstones died,
Never knowing that they shared one name,
Till the day they died, when a mother cried
My own dear sons lie slain.

[The Lights come up to show a re-enactment of the final moments of the play—the deaths of Mickey and Edward.][31]

The foreshadowing here is ballad-like in its intensity, its impression strengthened by the explicit ballad-like form of the Narrator's comments—almost always in a rhyming format and spoken rather than sung throughout the play.

The play's "north of England" locale is suggested rather than spelled out, no doubt in order to give a feeling of universality to its somber, schematic tale. Working-class life is still treated, but whereas in a play such as *Breezeblock Park* only working-class characters appear, in *Blood Brothers* the working-class characters and working-class life are explicitly contrasted with middle-class characters and middle-class life every step of the way—contrasted with telling irony and even bitterness.

This contrast is, in fact, the basis of the plot: a working-class mother, Mrs. Johnstone, has had seven children and is now pregnant again. Her husband has deserted her, so she must work cleaning other women's houses in order to support her family. When she discovers that she is to give birth to twins rather than the single child she had thought she just might manage to support, her position seems desperate. It is at this crisis that one woman who employs her, the childless Mrs. Lyons, offers to take one of the twins and raise it as her own. (Her husband has been away on a business trip abroad and will not be back until after the baby is born, so he need never know that the child is not his.) In desperation Mrs. Johnstone agrees, and so the twin boys are separated soon after birth, with the working-class Mrs. Johnstone taking the one she calls Mickey and the middle-class Mrs. Lyon taking the other, whom she names Eddie. Neither woman has, though, any special reason for taking the child she does. Facing them are simply two, seemingly interchangeable twins in a baby carriage. Moreover, Mrs. Johnstone, their mother, has no idea which of the two babies she keeps:

Mrs. Johnstone You'd better... you'd better see which one you want.

Mrs. Lyons I'll take...
Mrs. Johnstone No. Don't tell me which one. Just take him, take him.[32]

Thereafter, the two mothers try to steer the boys away from one another, but each boy is lonely and so, as children, Mickey and Eddie not only meet but come to like each other well enough to swear, in their childish way, to be "blood brothers" ever after. When she sees that she has failed to isolate her son, Eddie, from all contact with his twin, Mrs. Lyons insists that she, her husband, and their son move to another house. As ill luck would have it, however, the Johnstones also move to the same general area, though they are still living in public housing. The boys meet again, of course, and become good friends once again—despite the very different courses of their lives; Mickey works in a factory, while Eddie becomes a Town Councillor. Their friendship continues until they quarrel over Linda, their childhood playmate and now Mickey's wife. Mickey shoots Eddie in a jealous rage:

[...Mickey waves at Edward with his gun hand. The gun explodes and blows Edward apart. Mickey turns to the Police screaming the word 'No'. They open fire and four guns explode, blowing Mickey away$_{[\cdot]}$][33]

The plot structure seems mechanical and melodramatic when summarized baldly, but in performance it is uncommonly dramatic and effective—effective not only in the fatefulness of its unfolding, but even more so in its bitterness.

There is, of course, a constant contrast in the language used by the two parallel but contrasting households. Much more important, though, are the differences in the way the twin boys are treated—by society and, therefore, ultimately by life generally. Because he has been taken into the middle-class Lyons household, Eddie is sent away to school, and so he receives a good education and effortlessly rises to be a Town Councillor. Mickey, on the other hand, receives only a brief education at the local schools and works at a factory job until bad economic times come. He then loses his job—dismissed, as a "sign of

the times," by Mr. Lyons, the managing director of his firm.[34] The fact that the two young men are twins, and were selected purely arbitrarily by their two mothers, underscores the arbitrariness of their contrasting fates.

The career-determining differences in social class are constantly underlined. In consecutive incidents, for example, Eddie is driven off to school by his father in the family car, while Mickey goes to his local school by bus.[35] A more significant difference emerges when, as children, Eddie and Mickey are caught by a policeman perpetrating the childish prank of throwing stones through windows. The policeman first visits the working-class Mrs. Johnstone and speaks to her sternly and with authority:

> **Policeman** And he was about to commit a serious crime, love. Now, do you understand that? You don't wanna end up in court again, do y'?
> [Mrs. Johnstone shakes her head]
> Well, that's what's gonna happen if I have any more trouble from one of yours. I warned you last time, didn't I, Mrs. Johnstone, about your Sammy?
> [Mrs. Johnstone nods]
> Well, there'll be no more bloody warnings from now on. Either you keep them in order, Missis, or it'll be the courts for you, or worse, won't it?
> [Mrs. Johnstone nods]
> Yes, it will.

The Policeman then moves directly to the Lyons house, where he is ill at ease and where his manner is markedly milder and more differential:

> **Policeman** An er, as I say, it was more of a prank, really, Mr. Lyons. I'd just dock his pocket money if I was you. (Laughs) But, one thing I would say, if y'don't mind me sayin', is well, I'm not sure I'd let him mix with the likes of them in future. Make sure he keeps with his own kind, Mr. Lyons. Well er, thanks for the drink, sir. All the best now. He's a good lad, aren't you...? Goodnight, sir. (He replaces his helmet)[36]

Eddie is being let off easy and henceforth should "keep with his own kind"—that is, away from his twin brother.

The lives of the two brothers are, then, clearly contrasted throughout the play—contrasted when their origin as twins would lead one to expect that the similarities in life would predominate. The

differences dominate even though, both as children and as young adults, their true relationship unguessed by either, Mickey and Eddie find common ground—and even happiness—in their activities together —both when there are just the two of them and when Linda joins them. Even then, though, they notice the differences. In fact, each envies the freedom he perceives in the other's situation.

Economics and the class structure thus drive the twins apart until, near the end of the play, the sullen, embittered Mickey, having lost his job at the factory managed by Eddie's father and his wife, Linda, having been attracted by the more winning Eddie, shouts out:

> **Mickey**... I could kill you. We were friends weren't we? Blood brothers, wasn't it? Remember?
> **Edward** Yes, Mickey, I remember.
> **Mickey** Well, how come you got everything... an' I got nothin' {?}[37]

At this crisis, with Mickey threatening to shoot Eddie in his jealous rage, his mother, Mrs. Johnstone, arrives to stop him, as she thinks, by telling him the truth about the boys' birth. She tells it in a way which makes clear both its economic basis and the arbitrary way in which the twin boys were allotted different social fates:

> Mickey. Don't shoot Eddie. He's your brother. You had a twin brother. I couldn't afford to keep both of you. His mother couldn't have kids. I agreed to give one of you away!

Mickey's response, however inevitable, is heart-rending:

> (something that begins deep down inside him) You! (Screaming) You! Why didn't you give me away! (He stands glaring at her, almost uncontrollable with rage) I could have been... I could have been him![38]

The narrator's final comments are explicit in summarizing the social implications of the play:

> And do we blame superstition for what came to pass?
> Or could it be what we, the English, have come to know as class?[39]

The inevitability of the rhyme matches the inevitability of that which

drove the twin brothers apart. And that inevitability is not so much the fate foreshadowed by the play's many superstitious omens (shoes on tables, for instance) as economic fate in particular. It is the economics of England's class society which has ruined both Mickey and Eddie, just as it blights the lives of virtually all of Russell's characters.

As of this writing (the winter of 1991), Willy Russell's last written, and last produced, play is *Shirley Valentine* of 1988—a play which returns to Russell's typical patterns, eschewing the extraordinary qualities of *Blood Brothers.* The situation again involves a dissatisfied working-class wife yearning to escape, the tone is again wryly humorous rather than bitter. However, the author modulates his usual basic materials so beautifully that all seems fresh and winning.

As has been mentioned above, no doubt much of the popularity of *Educating Rita* may be attributable to its two-character, one-set format —making it financially attractive to a wide range of theatrical venues. *Shirley Valentine* keeps the simplicity while reversing the requirements: two sets, but only one character. With this reversal Russell has no doubt increased the difficulties of production, for all depends upon one actress, but this has not precluded two triumphant London runs, one with Pauline Collins and the other with Paula Wilcox, and the film version (again with the Academy Award-nominated Miss Collins) opened up the text effortlessly to a normal complement of characters.

In one sense, in *Shirley Valentine* Russell returns full circle to *Our Day Out*, his play for young people which began life as a television drama in 1976. In both plays the basic contrast is between Liverpool and a beach. In the earlier text, though, the beach is one near Liverpool to which the school children are taken on a school excursion. In the later play, on the other hand, the beach is on the Greek island of Corfu—in the far-away sunny south of Europe which has, at least since the nineteenth century, had such a hold on the imaginations of those who dwell in the cool, wan stretches of northern Europe. What attracts Shirley Valentine to Greece is much the same as what attracted

E. M. Forster's repressed English people and Ibsen's Nora to Italy, or Norman Douglas's Bishop Heard to that other island of Nepenthe—the chance for long-delayed adventure and freedom.

Shirley Valentine is, though, significantly different from *Our Day Out* in its basic premise. In the earlier play the school children are *taken* to the beach, but Shirley Valentine goes of her own free will. More, Shirley, unlike the immature adolescents of the earlier play, qualifies as a real Russell heroine—one who, fully mature emotionally, manages to break free from a web of conflicting circumstances which would imprison a lesser person.

Shirley is a working-class Liverpool mother of forty-two, married to Joe Bradshaw and with two children—"Our Millandra shares a flat with Sharron-Louise now. An' our Brian's livin' in a squat," having become "Britain's first ever busker poet."[40] Shirley herself works cleaning other women's houses—just like Mrs. Johnstone of *Blood Brothers.* Although, unlike Mrs. Johnstone, Shirley does have a husband at home, she has stopped loving him:

> An' what's he like? My Feller... Well he likes everything to be as it's always been. Like his tea always has to be on the table as he comes through that door. If the plate isn't landin' on the table just as his foot is landin' on the mat, there's ructions.

Her dissatisfaction has been growing, but has found no outlet:

> I always said I'd leave him when the kids grew up—but by the time they'd grown there was nowhere to go.[41]

Shirley, thus deprived of pleasant companionship by both husband and children, has been reduced to talking to the wall.

Marriage has, in fact, done for Shirley what Linda had feared it would do for her in *Stags and Hens*—its barren lovelessness has changed her, and changed her for the worse and without her realizing it:

> An' in me head there's this voice that keeps sayin', "I used to be Shirley Valentine. I used to be Shirley Valentine... I used to be Shirley..." (She is crying.) What happened? Who turned me into this? I don't want this.... Remember Shirley

> Valentine? She got married to a boy called Joe an' one day she came to live here. An' an' even though her name was changed to Bradshaw she was still Shirley Valentine. For a while. She still... knew who she was.... They got married, they made a home, they had kids and brought them up. And somewhere along the way the boy called Joe turned into "him" and Shirley Valentine turned into this and what I can't remember is the day or the week or the month or the... when it happened. When it stopped bein' good. When Shirley Valentine disappeared, became just another name on the missin' persons list.[42]

Rather as in *Blood Brothers*, Shirley is explicitly contrasted with a figure who has, to her, always represented a higher social class (although, necessarily in a one-woman play, this contrasting character is never seen). However, in this use of the motif Russell does it with a "switch," for the "upper-class character," Shirley's fellow student Marjorie Majors, is revealed not to be as she has always seemed. Russell's refusal here to accept the upper classes on their own terms is unusual for him, though not unique. In *Blood Brothers*, the most useful (and obvious) comparison, Eddie, while unmistakably superior to the Johnstones in his manners and income, is blamelessly so. In his role as managing director of Mickey's factory, Eddie's father does indeed authorize Mickey's discharge, but his decision is impartial and not at all personal; even his mother's actions, while sometimes reprehensible, are understandable. This is similar to the parallel situation in Shaw's *Pygmalion*, in which the manners of, say, Henry Higgins' mother are generally accepted, by Shaw, his characters, and his audience, as obviously superior to those of the flower girls in Covent Garden.

Shirley's own experiences in school (if nowhere else) have shown her how different classes are treated differently. The headmistress

> used to come into assembly sometimes an' ask like a spot question, an' whoever got it right would get loads of housepoints, an' it was nearly always Marjorie Majors who got it right—she took private elocution lessons an' she left school with just under four billion housepoints.[43]

Shirley remembers how the headmistress passed over her in favor of Marjorie, even though Shirley knew the answer and Marjorie did not. Shirley remarks that she "was never really interested in school after

that" and "became a rebel." Even so,

> The only thing I hated was me. I didn't want to be a rebel. I wanted to be nice. I wanted to be like Marjorie Majors.[44]

Throughout her years as a struggling wife and mother Shirley has maintained her image of the glamorous Marjorie Majors, imagining her as no doubt an air hostess by now, able to travel the world at will and generally do what Shirley can only dream of doing. Recently, though, by chance Shirley encountered Marjorie in front of the Adelphi Hotel, in downtown Liverpool. In the course of their subsequent conversation, throughout which Marjorie is "dead elegant," Shirley learns that Marjorie, far from being an air hostess, is in reality "a high class hooker"—scheduled to fly off to Paris that very evening.[45] All very "high class," to be sure, but also indubitably a "hooker." So much for the depth of the elegance and fine manners of Shirley's supposed social superiors.

This surprising turn of events is soon followed by a second startling discovery:

> An' d'y'know what she told me? When we were at school... She wanted to be like me. The two of us... we each wanted to be the other. I was sad when I thought about it. Like the two of us could have been great mates—y'know real close. We didn't half get on well together, that afternoon, in the Adelphi. We were rememberin' all kinds. I could've sat there forever—neither of us wanted to leave.[46]

This clearly echoes the situation in *Blood Brothers*, though in a lighter key; if Russell intends to suggest that his "upper-class" characters have attained and kept their position in life by prostituting their talents, it remains only a suggestion. In each case, the world has treated two characters very differently, and as a result they have come to perceive the world, and each other, differently. "The world" has made them rivals when they were meant to be friends. Moreover, just as Mickey and Eddie envied each other's freedom, so did Shirley and Marjorie want to be like one another. The lower-class character envied the freedom which "a better background" conferred on the other, while the middle-class character envied the other's freedom from the limi-

tations imposed, or perceived to be imposed, by her very "advantages."

Shirley's chance to escape comes unexpectedly when her "mate" Jane, now divorced, receives some money by selling her house and offers to take her on a two-week vacation on Corfu. From the beginning Shirley knows that her husband, Joe, would disapprove of the idea; he "gets culture shock if we go to Chester,"[47] and anyway her going would disrupt his daily routine. Therefore, she goes secretly—after having provided for Joe's needs during her absence. In summoning the courage to make this break, however temporary, Shirley is contrasted with her neighbor Gillian, who has never been "brave enough" just to wear the silk robe which she gives Shirley as a going-away present:

> "Oh Shirley," she said, "How I wish I had. How I wish I'd had your... bravery."[48]

A similar contrast in social bravery comes when, shortly after her arrival in Corfu, Shirley proves to be more adventurous in trying the local cuisine than the two fellow British tourists whom she meets there, "Jeanette an' Dougie Walsh—from Manchester." The Walshes invite Shirley to join them at dinner:

> It wasn't until we got to the main course that they even acknowledged we were in Greece. And then I wish they hadn't bothered. Everything was wrong—the sun was too hot for them, the sea was too wet for them, Greece too Greek for them. They were that type, y'know, if they'd been at the last supper they would have asked for chips.[49]

Shirley is, then, both brave enough to search out the unknown by going to Greece, and adventurous enough to enjoy and appreciate it after she arrives. In fact, she even has a brief, but thoroughly satisfying, love affair with Costas, a local restaurant owner. In the wake of this fling, she finds herself unable to face a return to her former life in Liverpool. Her children and her husband ignore her except when they want something; the children do not need her any more, and her husband does not appreciate her. So why return? What began as a fortnight's holiday now promises to lengthen indefinitely.

The two settings of the play exemplify the choice of alternative lives, and life styles, which Shirley faces. The first act took place in a familiar interior—"The kitchen of a semi-detached house. It is a well-established kitchen, bearing signs of additions and alterations which have been made over the years." The "bleakness" of its "chipboard and formica" had been only partially overcome by Shirley's little decorative touches.[50] Now in the second act, though, she is outdoors—on "A secluded section of shore, dotted with rocks and baked by the Mediterranean sun. It is an underdeveloped corner of the bay, a place not yet appropriated by tourists. In the background we can see a hint of the village and the taverna. The deep blue of the sky dominates."[51]

Shirley decides to stay on in Greece, a decision which flabbergasts Jane—and so exasperates Joe that he overcomes his dislike of travel and of foreign places in order to come to Corfu himself:

> An' then I got his letter sayin' he was comin' to get me. To take me back home. Agh God love him, he must've been watchin' Rambo. He'll be here soon. I hope he stays for a while. He needs a holiday. He needs to feel the sun on his skin an' to be in water that's as deep as forever, an' to have his wet head kissed. He needs to stare out to sea. And to understand.[52]

Whatever Joe's reaction to Corfu, though, it seems clear that Shirley plans to stay on there. She has not, she reports, fallen in love with Costas, but she *has* "fallen in love with the idea of livin.'"[53] Most completely and definitely of all Russell's characters, she has actually done what so many of them have only dreamed of doing—escaped to a better place and to a better life. Faced with the natural glory and the carefree life of Corfu, she has realized what she has been missing all these years:

> I felt... awfully, awfully old. What I kept thinkin' about was how I'd lived such a little life. An' one way or another even that would be over pretty soon. I thought to meself, my life has been a crime really—a crime against God, because... I didn't live it fully. I'd allowed myself to live this little life when inside me there was so much. So much more that I could have lived a bigger life with—but it had all gone unused....[54]

Shirley has come to know also that it is the same for men as for women, that Joe is in the same predicament, but is as yet unable to recognize it —or admit it:

> . . . I've looked at Joe, an' I know it's the same for him. He had more life in him than he could use. An' so he carries all this . . . waste around with him. It's the same for everyone. I know it. . . . We say we're fine. An' we carry on an' on an' on until we die. An' most of us die . . . long before we're dead.[55]

The play thus ends with its heroine on the sunlit beach, removed from workaday life in Liverpool and effectively returned from being Mrs. Joseph Bradshaw (Shirley) to being simply Shirley Valentine. The image, as startling as it is simple, may be taken as capping Willy Russell's work to date—and as indicating a new direction for him and for his characters in an era when the possibilities for personal choice seem to have multiplied in so many ways. It is as if Henry James's Lambert Strether had, after all, found lasting happiness in France—as if Arthur Laurents' Leona Samish had, after all, found true love on her summer vacation in Venice. The social forces operating in *Blood Brothers* are not, then, inescapable.

Russell has conveyed much the same appreciation of his characters' grim situation, and much the same message as to the desirability of escaping it, many times before, but only Rita and Shirley have really managed to pull escapes off—and to do so convincingly. The artistic skill and the emotional power with which Russell has written his last three plays bode well for his future—and for the future enjoyment and edification of his countless admirers.

NOTES

1. Willy Russell, *Our Day Out* (London: Methuen, 1984), 50.
2. Ibid., 56.
3. As in *One for the Road* (London: Samuel French, 1985), iii.
4. Willy Russell, *"Educating Rita," "Stags and Hens," and "Blood Brothers": Two Plays and a Musical* (London: Methuen, 1986), 161.
5. Ibid., 161–162.

   (In Russell's comic poem of 1978, "Sam O'Shanker: A Liverpool Tale," the

bridge near Knowsley Church is the place where the pursuing devils almost catch the eponymous hero as he drives from a night in the barroom back "home to his reception cool/twenty miles away in Liverpool." (Willy Russell, *Sam O'Shanker: A Liverpool Tale* (Liverpool: Mersey Yarns, 1978), 10. Russell presents this poem (p. 5) "not as parody but a sincere flattery" of Robert Bruns and his "Tam O'Shanter.")

6. Ibid., 161.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 163–164.
9. Ibid., 163.
10. Willy Russell, *I Read The News Today: A Play* (London: Samuel French, 1987), iv, 13.
11. Russell, *Educating Rita, etc.*, 161.
12. Willy Russell, *Breezeblock Park: A Play* (London: Samuel French, 1978), 1.
13. Russell, *One for the Road*, 1.
14. Willy Russell, *"Shirley Valentine" and "One for the Road"* (London: Methuen, 1989), 1.
15. Willy Russell, *Stags and Hens: A Comedy* (London: Samuel French, 1985), 1.
16. Ibid., 48. Here, and throughout this paper, brackets have been added to indicate stage directions when the printed text does not indicate them by parentheses.
17. Russell, *Educating Rita, etc.*, 208.
18. Willy Russell, *Blood Brothers: A Musical* (London: Samuel French, 1985), 49.
19. Ibid., 59.
20. Russell, *Educating Rita, etc.*, 169.
21. Ibid., 228.
22. Russell, *One for the Road*, 7.
23. Ibid., 35.
24. Ibid., 40.
25. Russell, *Breezeblock Park*, 58.
26. The similarities in situation and theme seem self-evident, despite Russell's own disclaimer of any *intentional* attempt at imitation or emulation. See "Not Really an Introduction," *Educating Rita, etc.*, ix.
27. Russell, *Educating Rita, etc.*, 232.
28. Ibid., 231.
29. Peter Shaffer, *Equus* (New York: Avon, 1975), 29–30, 123–125.
30. Russell, *Educating Rita*, 210.
31. Russell, *Blood Brothers*, 1.
32. Ibid., 11.
33. Ibid., 69.
34. Ibid., 57.
35. Ibid., 38–39.
36. Ibid., 30.
37. Ibid., 69.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid., 70.
40. Russell, *Shirley Valentine*, 2.

41. Ibid.
42. Ibid., 13–14.
43. Ibid., 10.
44. Ibid., 11.
45. Ibid., 12.
46. Ibid., 12–13.
47. Ibid., 4.
48. Ibid., 22.
49. Ibid., 26.
50. Ibid., 1.
51. Ibid., 24.
52. Ibid., 35.
53. Ibid., 33.
54. Ibid., 30.
55. Ibid., 33–34.